

The Transcultural Reinterpretation of Italian Canadiana in the Writings of Michelle Alfano, Licia Canton and Terri Favro

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Abstract: During the 1970s and the 1980s, Italian Canadian Literature in English represented a thriving field of literary expression in Canadian culture. The first generation of writers narrated the trauma of displacement while shaping the cultural basis of Italian Canadiana and its place within contemporary Canadian literature. In the last twenty years, the new generations of writers of Italian origin have reinterpreted and questioned the label of ethnic literature; the constellations of literary tropes and attachments that represented the first wave of Italian Canadian literature is a spectral presence to be reinterpreted within contemporary Canadian fiction. Michelle Alfano, Licia Canton and Terry Favro reinterpret Italian Canadiana in transcultural terms by retaining the spectral presence of the ancestral culture. I argue that the transcultural spaces of their narratives write a dialogue between the past and the present through spectrality and affects; it also shows how they have overcome the trauma of dislocation and it evidences their identification with Canadian culture.

Keywords: Contemporary Canadian fiction, Italian Canadian fiction, Italian Canadiana, transculturality, spectrality.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Italian Canadian literature in English represented a thriving field of literary expression in Canadian culture. Pasquale Verdicchio muses that the first generation of Italian Canadian writers had to undergo a painful process of cultural translation in order to come to terms with their personal history of dislocation (227). Their narratives of that trauma of displacement shaped Italian Canadiana and secured its place in contemporary Canadian literature (Loriggio, *Italian Canadian Literature, Italian Migration*; Pivato, *Shirt of the Happy Man*; Tuzi, *Theorizing Canadian Minority Texts*).

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In this essay, I argue that the literary tropes and affective attachments of that first wave can be interpreted as a spectral (productive) presence in contemporary Canadian fiction: writers of Italian origin enact Italian Canadiana in transcultural terms by retaining vestiges of their ancestral culture. To make my point, I consider four works by three female writers: *Made Up of Arias* (2008) by Michelle Alfano, *The Proxy Bride* (2012) by Terri Favro, and two short stories by Licia Canton, "In Front of the Bell Centre" (2015) and "In the Stacks" (2013).

Michelle Alfano is the co-organizer of the *(Not So) Nice Italian Girls and Friends* reading group. She also blogs (see <http://notsoniceitaliangirls.blogspot.com.es>, and alitchick.blogspot.ca). Her latest work is a personal memoir titled *The Unfinished Doll House: A Memoir of Gender and Identity* (Cormorant Books, 2017). Domenico Capilongo considers Alfano "one of the most vibrant and honest voices in the Toronto literary community." Terri Favro's other works include *Sputnik Children* (ECW, 2017), and *Once Upon a Time in West Toronto* (Inanna, 2017), the sequel to *Proxy Bride*. Finally, Licia Canton is the author of the short-story collection *Almond Wine and Fertility* (Longbridge, 2008), and is working on a second collection, *The Pink House and Other Stories* (due out in 2018, also from Longbridge).

In my view, the transcultural spaces of their narratives create a dialogue between the past and the present through spectrality and affects. In an interview with *The Humber Literary Review*, Terri Favro, for example, spoke of her interest in history; and in an essay she acknowledges that the stories she heard as a child during family gatherings had a powerful effect on her decision to become a writer: "When I look over my shoulder at the spirits who follow me, I can see that my family made me a storyteller" (*Stories* 235). Transculturality also shows how contemporary Canadian writers of Italian origin have overcome the trauma of dislocation and it evidences their identification with Canadian culture; Licia Canton claims: "I have always felt a deep connection to my Italian roots, but I am a Montrealer and a Canadian" (*Canadian Writers* 90). In a conversation with Domenico Capilongo in 2017, Michelle Alfano speaks of *Made Up of Arias* (and her second novel, still unpublished, about the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano) as an intersection of her Canadian present with her Italian background. However, she also points out that her current fiction project "does not touch upon my ethnicity at all"¹.

By the 1990s, many scholars were starting to delve into the notion

¹ <http://italocanadese.com/2017/03/15/un-momento-with-michelle-alfano>

of ethnic literatures (D'Alfonso; Pivato, *Shirt of the Happy Man*, *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures*; Tuzi, *Theorizing Canadian Minority Texts*, *The Power of Allegiances*; Beneventi). Gianfranco Rosoli, for example, highlights the cultural shift that occurred between the first and second generations of Italian Canadian writers. The latter became active in the 1970s, and as a result was less marginal than the first arrivals—influenced as it was “by the growing self-awareness of ethnicity” (Rosoli 176–177). After John Porter’s influential book *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* appeared in 1965, the concept of the cultural mosaic (as theorized decades earlier, in 1938, by John Murray Gibbon) shifted. Porter posited a fuller understanding of multiculturalism, one that did not prioritize English-centred cultural contexts over other ethnic Canadian social realities. Marino Tuzi is one of several scholars to point out that “ethnic writing presents many interpretations of ‘Canadianness,’” many of which contest those English-centred viewpoints (*Theorizing Canadian Minority Texts* 86). The debate on ethnicity and literature that followed articulated, sometimes controversially, the notion of a Canadian cultural mosaic. Since that time, the definition of Canadian literature has become less rigid and more fluid (Kamboureli; Moyes, Canton & Beneventi; Dobson; Doughty & Tuzi).

As well, since the new millennium, the very label of “ethnic literature” is being questioned by scholars and writers (Beneventi; Anselmi). Licia Canton, Verena Fazio and Jim Zuccherro, for instance, address the issue as a diachronic process that signifies a shift in our understanding of Italian Canadian writing not only in relation to Italian Canadiana, but also within mainstream contemporary Canadian literature (*Reflections on Culture* 15). And De Luca and Saidero point out that

the recognition of socio-economic disparities between ethnic groups [...] has also led some to criticize the vertical alignment of Canadian multiculturalism and the creation of invisible ghettos, where ethnic difference is squeezed into separate, self-contained spaces, rather than being called to participate in unprejudiced transcultural dialogue. (8)

According to Arianna Dagnino, transculturality is the intersection of multiple literary spaces across cultures. In her view, such transcultural texts “express the confluential nature of cultures” (3). My point is that these realities and emotional insights derive from the spectral presence of the ancestral culture. They break the limits of “postcolonial and multicultural approaches” (4) to influence, question and innovate at the same time, mainstream discourses.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida claims that our lives are always haunted by the ghosts of what came before us. "The more life there is, the graver the spectre of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to ... *answer for the dead, respond to the dead*" (136). Derridean spectres are neither uncanny presences in individuals' lives, nor merely phantasmal representations of trauma or melancholia. On the contrary, they construct what Derrida calls a "politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations" (xviii) that defies the tendency of the past to recede into oblivion. For him, these unforgotten presences represent the links between past and present, as well as the possibility of interacting with the past in order to create the future. Obviously, spectrality offers a productive approach to addressing transcultural texts, and to developing a dialogue between old and new cultural identifications. For immigrants, the tropes of displacement and/or isolation are filtered through the spectral presence of the past.

Drawing partially on Carolyn Redl's insights, I argue that in the works I discuss, the narrators' point of view is Canadian, and the stories are set in Canada (and mostly in urban environments). The characters' cultural heritage is neither seen as a traumatic issue, nor as an unalterable mark of ethnicity. They engage in encounters, and form affective connections, as part of their Canadian reality. As William Anselmi suggests, "We define ourselves by the cultural milieu that we inhabit" (25). Those attachments materialize through an *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari) composed both of memories, and of sensory experiences: sounds, odours, and above all sights—such as the bright lights of urban scenarios.

The ten chapters that comprise Alfano's *Made Up of Arias* describe the everyday life of an immigrant family, the Pentangelis, living on Paradise Street in Hamilton, Ontario, "We lived in Hamilton, not Upper Paradise Street which was on the mountain. Just Paradise" (9). The children's mother, Seraphina, is passionate about opera, and idolizes "The Divine One," Maria Callas; each chapter title of the novella references music of some kind: (the titles are: made up of arias, choruses, with orchestral accompaniment, recitatives, scenery, a form of drama, and sometimes dance, in which music is a dominant factor, acting, and etc.). They frame scenes of domestic life, performed to a constant soundtrack of melodramatic music. The cultural interaction between the past life of the narrator's parents in Sicily, and the present life of the family in Hamilton, is indicated by opera. Lila tells that: "Opera has always had two meanings in our home, firstly, in its traditional sense, and, secondly,

in its other meaning, as *Ch'è 'sta opera?*" or What is this drama/noise/chaos?" (7).

Another Ontario working-class community, St. Catharines, is the setting for Terri Favro's *The Proxy Bride*. The difficult conditions in Italy around 1960 persuade young Ida to accept a proxy marriage proposal from an older man named Marcello Trovato; he is called Senior in the novella. Once she joins her new husband in Canada, she falls in love with his son, Marcello Junior, and they finally run away together. Their love story is told against a backdrop of petty crimes, illegality and violence.

Many of Licia Canton's short stories are set in Montreal, her own home town. In "In Front of the Bell Centre," the protagonist is run over by a car downtown in the winter, and lies seriously injured on the freezing pavement. To take her mind off her distress, she mentally navigates her route for driving her daughter home: "By now she would have been sitting in the passenger seat [...] By now we would have been on Sherbrooke St. heading towards Pie IX Blvd., in a rush to get home" (92). Canton uses this mapping of the city to convey both a feeling of vulnerability and the narrator's connection with Montreal, whose cartography, as a result, is felt as a healing presence.

In *Made Up of Arias*, it is Seraphina who represents the dialogic interaction between Italian culture and Canadian domestic life. As she separates the laundry, she explains to Lilla, the narrator, the difference between Callas and all the other singers. "You see [...] *La Divina* is a wonderful actress who *also* sings. Most of the others are good singers who are *trying* to act" (14). The constant presence of classical music connects all the characters, and also connects the family's domestic space in Hamilton with the parents' village in Sicily. Lilla loves to look at the photographs her mother has on the wall—pictures "of my grandparents, Lilla and Pepe, my mother's parents, and photographs of my parents' village of Racalmuto [...] These were in black and white, or sepia-toned. I could almost feel the history seep into my fingertips when I touched them with one eager finger. I felt the weight of these things which my mother held dear, felt the weight of its tradition and the ways of doing things" (25).

In *The Proxy Bride*, Marcello has almost forgotten his own country, Italy. His memory of his mother, Sofia (now long since dead), is mainly of "a bready, warm presence beside him on the deck of a ship" (20) when he arrives in Canada. Favro also tells us that his first "solid, too-real-not-to-be-true memory of Canada is of himself holding Sofia's hand in a train station" (20). Ida's life too was disrupted by WWII. She

tells Marcello: "My father was dead before I was born, a Partisan in the Garibaldi Brigade. Shot by the Germans" (74). Later in the novella, a violent row erupts when Marcello Senior finds out that Ida and Marcello Junior have fallen in love. At that time, the young man discovers that his mother, Senior's first wife, was also a proxy bride—and that the man he had always thought of as his father is not, in fact, related to him at all. This is told by Prima, the old woman who raised him after his mother died:

"Your father a stonemason who die under a wall when an earthquake come. Your mother's family, all dead in a bombing in the War. She marry Senior to look after you. Then she die." He can feel Prima's hands trembling in his. "*Tragedia, tragedia.*"

"Who am I, then?" Marcello wants to know.

"Your name is *Michael*, like the archangel. Your father's name, *non lo so.*" (114)

After this revelation about the past, Marcello and Ida move away to Prince George, British Columbia, to build a life and a future together. Once there, he decides that his name will be Michael, and he sends a postcard to his friend Christie, still in St. Catharines which symbolizes his move forward: "She looks at the postcard [...] *Greetings from*, the words on the photograph say. Flipping the postcard, she sees a one-line message, printed in careful draughtsman's hand: *Welcome to the World of Tomorrow. Michael*" (123).

The constellations of attachments in these narratives can be seen as a "new encounter of forces" (Gregg and Seighworth 3) that help to forge new realities for the characters. In *The Proxy Bride*, a minor character is Pasquale, a neighbour's child. Deprived, fatherless, and neglected by his mother (a compulsive gambler), Pasquale—known to everyone only as Bum Bum—lives mainly on the streets, a prey to poverty, violence, hunger, and sexual exploitation. Marcello feels compelled to care for the child: he saves his life when he is trapped in a burning building, and finds him a foster home (120). Those affective attachments bridge Marcello's past and the present, and allow him to conceive a new identity and way of being.

In *Made Up of Arias*, the characters form a net of affective encounters through music, art and performance: "Each family member had their preferences and the great 19th century operas often accompanied our domestic chores and pursuits" (16). In Licia Canton's *Almond Wine and Fertility*, the characters' personal attachments overcome the dichotomy

of old country versus new country (Caporale-Bizzini). Affectspheres illustrate Canton's characters' stories in a way that, as Giulia De Gasperi suggests, mingle "the past and the present ... with everyday life" (45).

In Alfano's, Canton's and Favro's narratives, the point of view is mostly from a Canadian perspective; Italy is not a primary source of inspiration. In *The Proxy Bride*, as I described earlier, Marcello has no memories of the old country, and his mother—who is the connecting link—is no more than "a shadowy figure" (20) for him. Nor is Ida willing to go back to Italy when she leaves her husband. Her dream is to go and live somewhere she can have horses. When she and Marcello are planning their departure together with a map, he "points out places he's always wanted to visit: Montreal, Winnipeg, the Yukon. Ida shakes her head and runs her finger firmly along the west coast: horses and mountains and ranches and ocean" (91). In *Made Up of Arias*, Lilla and her brother and sister regard Italy as an exotic, remote place, which they can only imagine through their mother's vivid storytelling. Their real life is in Hamilton, in the house "behind a giant billboard" (9).

As suggested above, most of the characters in transcultural texts "are consciously aware of their cultural heritage" (Redl 31)—though this is not traumatic for them, and their ethnicity is not emphasized. Licia Canton's short story "In the Stacks" is about two people, Rita and Massimiliano, who meet accidentally in the library of the University of Montreal while looking up references about Italian immigration to Canada. Their cultural heritage (the reader soon discovers that they both belong to Italian Canadian families) is embodied in the scholarly studies by well-known authorities such as Bagnell, Harney, Iacovetta, Ramirez, and Scarpaci: Rita "picked up Bagnell's *A Portrait of the Italian Canadians* and leafed through it" (129). After their encounter, she and Massimiliano talk to each other in both English and French. Rita thinks of herself as a Montrealer, and Massimiliano as a Québécois. Canton voices Rita's feeling of cultural resentment. "Who is this québécois, she wondered, telling me I have an accent? She did have an accent, when she spoke French. And when she spoke English. And when she spoke Italian. She spoke properly, but in Québec, if you don't speak like a québécois, you have an accent" (131).

Massimiliano's spectral past is highlighted both by his Italian name, and by his relationship to Québec's resistance to English:

My mother is a québécoise so I was raised in both cultures [...] I only have francophone friends ... that's the way it is since I work in a francophone milieu, and I don't speak Italian, and I am uncomfortable

with English [...] I went to French school, raised in a French neighbourhood, work in a French office. No need to speak English. We're in Québec, remember? (132)

For Rita her ancestral culture, though important, is just one of the many influences on her identity. "She did not want to get into a political debate," Canton tells us, as Massimiliano holds forth on the all-French street signs (133). In their different ways, though, both people's life stories are firmly anchored in contemporary Canadian reality. As a general rule, transcultural writers do not experience Canadian culture as an unfriendly space, but rather as one that defines their sense of belonging.

Alfano's, Canton's and Favro's narratives all explore the spectral presence of the ancestral culture and of history, and describe the new affectspheres that bridge the past and the present. As Rosi Braidotti suggests, the process of constructing new attachments enlists "memory and the imagination to the crucial task of inventing new figurations, and new ways of representing [...] complex subjects" (193). In this sense, the three authors are mapping a new creative transcultural space with their stories, describing perhaps a ceaseless process of "perpetual becoming" (Gregg and Seighworth 3).

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